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ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis

What Gorbachev Risks

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A great opportunity is at hand — historic is not too strong a word — to ease relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. But the opportunity may be lost if the Soviet leadership does not quickly correct a gross misstep. That is the detention of Nicholas Daniloff, Moscow correspondent of U.S. News & World Report.

The stakes are high in the Daniloff affair. Its resolution will test the seriousness of Mikhail Gorbachev's desire to seek accommodation with the West — or, perhaps, test his ability to make that desire into effective policy.

Mr. Gorbachev has sent many signals that he is ready to deal. On a broad range of arms control issues, in particular, he has changed Soviet positions that have been longstanding obstacles to agreement. He is evidently eager for enough progress on arms control to make possible a meaningful summit conference with President Reagan at the end of the year.

For 13 months now Mr. Gorbachev has had a moratorium on Soviet nuclear tests. The Reagan Administration brushed it off as propaganda when he first announced the moratorium and later extended it. But the fact is that the Soviet Union has not carried out any tests in that time, and the impression grows that Mr. Gorbachev is serious about a comprehensive test ban treaty.

The Daniloff affair's high stakes

In recent weeks Soviet officials have said that their nuclear test sites could be opened to American inspectors to monitor a test ban. That offer, if nailed down, would go a long way to ending U.S. doubts about verification of a treaty.

Similarly, at a Stockholm conference on means to prevent accidental war, a Soviet marshal offered to allow air and ground inspection of military forces if done in Soviet vehicles. The U.S. State Department called that offer "a significant step toward effective verification."

These and other steps have evidently had an impact on the Reagan Administration. Key figures in the Administration have all along been opposed in principle to new arms control agreements. But the balance seems to be tipping toward a more pragmatic view favoring a real effort at negotiation — and toward the belief that these next few months offer a rare opportunity to reach results.

Even more intriguing than the foreign-policy shifts, as one looks at Mr. Gorbachev's Soviet Union, are some changes of atmosphere at home. Often in the past Soviet moves toward accommodation abroad have been accompanied by crackdowns at home. Mr. Gorbachev seems to be easing up on both fronts.

Openness was the motto with which he assumed the leadership: a call for candor about public life. That claim looked hollow after the initial Soviet secrecy about the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. But Western correspondents in Moscow more recently have reported some real signs of more openness.

Soviet newspapers have published critical letters and articles on Chernobyl, on drug traffic in Moscow, on ill-conceived public works projects. The swift and detailed announcement of the cruise-ship sinking last week was extraordinary by past Soviet standards. And Soviet scientists, at the Vienna meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency, went a considerable distance in answering questions about Chernobyl.

In that context Mr. Daniloff's arrest is an extremely serious matter. It reawakens all our forebodings: How can we deal with a system that resorts to such transparent inventions as the trick to plant evidence of "spying" on a correspondent as thoughtful and straight as Nick Daniloff?

Some Kremlinologists believe that the K.G.B. acted on its own against Mr. Daniloff, in the hope of thus protecting its own man, Gennadi Zakharov, who is under arrest in New York. But even if the affair began that way, responsibility immediately passed to Mr. Gorbachev. Certainly only the leadership could approve the grave step of charging Mr. Daniloff with espionage.

For Americans, individuals always matter more than abstractions of foreign policy, however noble. Personalize an issue, and we care. If the espionage charge against Mr. Daniloff is pressed, virtually no American would want to go forward to a summit conference. The diplomats may keep talking for a while as they are, but not for long. The fragile opportunity will collapse.

Nor can the United States accept any direct linkage between Mr. Daniloff's treatment and the Zakharov case. The fools on President Reagan's staff in Santa Barbara who floated the idea of a deal are just that: fools. Secretary of State Shultz had it right, at Harvard, when he said we would not accept such an invitation to hostage-taking. It is for Mr. Gorbachev to find the way out. □